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ABSTRACT

A high school English teacher used her weekly Impromptu Poetry session to find out what 11th graders thought veterans had accomplished. The teacher developed a writing prompt that asked the students to describe a family member who had served in the military and to show what they understood about that person. Students who did not have a family member who served in the military were asked to write about how they felt about the military, for example, or war. The students then discussed the similarities and differences in the poems and grouped the poems into categories. Students recopied their poems on small squares of paper and arranged these in the form of a wreath on the bulletin board, edged with flowers from a catalogue and with photos of some of the veterans in the center. Parents waited by this board for parent-teacher conferences and expressed how interested and moved they were by these poetic histories. (Contains eight student poems and the teacher's sample poem.) (RS)

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Teaching Ideas and Topics

A Wreath for Veterans Day

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This teaching idea is excerpted from the October 1995 *Notes Plus*, published by NCTE.

It seems to me we do not commemorate Veterans Day with projects and discussions as we do, for example, Thanksgiving, the life of Martin Luther King, or the birthdays of presidents Washington and Lincoln.

To find out what my 11th graders thought veterans had accomplished, I used our weekly Impromptu Poetry session. Each Friday my students follow Joseph Tsujimoto's exercises in *Teaching Poetry Writing to Adolescents* (ERIC and NCTE, 1988). Tsujimoto's theory is that teens are capable of writing sensitive poetry and will do so with good prompts and models. We had been doing Impromptu Poetry in the last fifteen minutes of Friday classes.

First I made up prompts: Think of a family member who has served in the military. Describe him or her and show what you understand about that person. Your poem should (1) name the relative or identify the relationship; (2) give

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images to identify the war; (3) describe the relative's part or job; and (4) show the effect of the relative's participation on him or her, on family members, or on "the cause."

My model was one I made up myself. I thought of my childhood fascination with a picture in my grandmother's album:

Lost Cousin

I open Grandmother's pebbled black album.

Several pages past the great aunts and uncles

with their babies in billowy christening dresses

He looks confidently out from the sepia tones

of a studio portrait:

left hand at his side, right hand on his hip

behind a leather-cased revolver on his belt.

He wears a beret with two insignia I can't read.

He has a square mustache and one cocked eyebrow.

The Iron Cross of Germany is pinned to a buttonhole

exactly on the middle of his chest.

The Iron Cross! What did he do? How did he get it?

Did he lead a charge across the barbed wire of No Man's Land

so different from the studio landscape backdrop

where he poses?

I gently lift the photo from its corners.

On the back Grandmother's spidery script:

Neuville 1915. One of George's six sons,

all killed in the Great War.

I showed a photocopy of the soldier as I read the poem and passed out the exercise. Students in my first period class fairly burst with protests: I can't do this! My father wouldn't go to Vietnam and he won't talk about it! I don't have a relative who's ever fought! Nobody in my family has ever been in the military. It's a dumb holiday!

"Tell me those things in your poem," I replied. "If you don't have any family members who've ever been in the military, tell me how that feels. Or tell me how you feel about war-- war in general or a specific war. You have time to reflect--twenty-five minutes rather than the usual fifteen. I want to know what you think." Heads were already bent and pencils moving as the last grumbles petered out. In the next periods there were no protests; I don't know why. I do know I felt extraordinarily moved that evening as I sat and read the lines that made a variegated American wreath.

There were The Traditional Ones that could grace any VFW speech:

I look at my grandfather

with peppered hair and mug of coffee.

I watch him read the paper

and answer the TV during "Jeopardy."

They say he was in the war

that second war to end all wars.

He was stationed at Pearl Harbor.

But as I watch him

and gaze into his hazel eyes,

I see no pain

No fear of falling bombs

No outrage of humans suffering

No shock of losing loved ones

No fabled thousand-yard stare

But the warmth and compassion

of life.

--Samantha C. Sutton

One poem with The Right Stuff described an older relative recalling his wartime accomplishments with pride.

I sat with my uncle at

my grandmother's funeral.

At first he was quiet

because of the somber occasion.

Soon I got him in a conversation

about old times.

I asked him about the war.

His eyes lit up

He told me about how he invented a gun.

How he crippled a spy

And shot a man's ear off.

He became jovial for a while

but then remembered that

we were at a funeral.

--James Auler

Another student's variation reminded me of Grandfather telling tales of Westering in The Red Pony:

As I sit by the fire listening to my grandpa,

I see him flying over the Pacific Islands

looking for signals,

navigating the airship over enemy areas.

In his uniform he is sweating,

thinking hard which way to go.

Even though I have heard the story

one hundred times before, I listen.

I listen because he is one of the happiest men on earth

when he is telling that story.

--Ted Ulen

There were the poems of descendants from The Enemy Side. One Japanese student said that her grandparents will speak of civilian life or the Emperor but never the military side of the war. Our German exchange student wrote,

I remember the stories my grandpa tells,

of which my grandma says not all are true

and most of them exaggerated.

That he was in World War II is true.

It's true that he was shot in his right ear

and can't hear in it anymore.

It's true that he has a projectile in his back,

that he walked back from Russia

to Germany after he escaped captivity

--Mike Muckenhaupt

The Russian boy told the story from the other side of the lines:

900 day siege

people dying left and right

from cold, from hunger

Hope has long left the city

Yet one path remains

the Road of Life--Lake Ladoga

Grandpa drives the loaded truck

ice-cracking beneath the wheels

Against great odds he makes his trips

bringing grain to the besieged city Leningrad

--Alexander S. Kravasin

One of the most poignant was Rachel's:

My People are my war heroes

My People died in the gas chambers

and ovens of the Nazis. . .

My People--or should I say

their Skeletons?--labored in the death camps.

My People: The Jews.

--Rachel Reingold

There were memories On the Homefront. During World War II Scott's grandfather went straight from high school into a factory making propellers for B-52's. Jon's "Grandpa Leo" played in a military band. Amy's father was at the top of the lottery for Vietnam, but went to college. Robert's uncle did go and Lives with Guilt:

It was Vietnam

He was an infantryman

The wrath of murder

mocks him

He was young but

The War was wrong

~WAR IS WRONG~

~WAR IS WRONG~

In his head regret and guilt pulsate

~HATRED IS WRONG~

~HATRED IS WRONG~

Concealed within him

is his soul of Peace

dying to overcome the shame.

--Robert K. Frazier

One poem strongly represented several that expressed Indifference, even cynicism:

Veteran? What's a veteran?

Dad said my grandpa had served

Dad said he was an Air Corps pilot

Dad said he dropped nuclear bombs.

Now Grandpa is old, dusty, inactive.

He's never told me of these things

he did all those years ago.

It's just as well.

He'd just become one of those whiney

people who expect special treatment

just 'cause they were in World War II and killed people.

Big

Deal.

--Shannon Wright

After all the poems were read aloud, either by the authors or by me, we discussed them and noted contrasts and similarities. Some poems had sad or wistful tones, others were angry or accusing, and some were distant, indifferent. Students talked about the different messages of the poems and about how the different emotions reflected different experiences and perspectives. We eventually began to group like poems together, and we came up with the various categories--The Traditional Ones, The Right Stuff, The Enemy Side, and so on.

I said their diversity meant to me that we have accomplished something in the last century-- or why would the children and grandchildren of war enemies be peacefully writing side by side, caring for each other's individuality, not hating each other because of the hatreds of their fathers? That is the true American way, the ideal essence of our culture.

Students recopied their poems on small squares of paper and arranged these in the form of a wreath on the bulletin board, edged with flowers from a catalogue and with photos of some of the veterans

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